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Lentils: a superfood that will beef up your cooking

Lentils. High in fibre, protein and various vitamins and minerals all in a tasty, low-calorie package. But what is it? Well, they're the seeds from the *Lens culinaris* plant. You'd think that lentils are named for its lens-shape, but in fact, its glass lenses that are named after lentils!

Cooking time varies depending on the variety of lentil, but the most common lentils are the green and red ones. Dried lentils are less expensive than canned lentils and will keep in the pantry for a year. They're really easy to prepare. There's no soaking like with beans, and they can be boiled in water -- about 2 ½ cups of water for every cup of lentils.

Our first recipe is even easier, letting a slow cooker do the hard work. Lentils are great in soups, and this one is hearty and healthy. Make it the day after a ham dinner to deal with the leftover ham bone.

Our warm lentil salad with potatoes, asparagus and kale gets kicked with a Dijon-based dressing and crumbled goat cheese. This is a meal sized salad and will fill you right up.

SLOW COOKER LENTIL SOUP

2 cups (500 mL) dried green lentils, rinsed and drained
8 cups (2 L) canned chicken broth
1 meaty ham bone
1 1/2 cups (375 mL) chopped carrots
1 1/2 cups (375 mL) chopped celery
1 cup (250 mL) chopped onion
1/4 cup (50 mL) chopped fresh parsley
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1/2 tsp (2 mL) thyme, crumbled
1/4 tsp (1 mL) freshly ground pepper
1/8 tsp (0.5 mL) cayenne pepper
1 bay leaf
2 cups (500 mL) thinly sliced spinach

Combine all ingredients except spinach in a 4 or 5 quart (4 or 5 L) slow cooker. Cover and cook on low heat setting for 8 - 9 hours or until lentils are tender. Remove ham bone and bay leaf; discard bay leaf. Remove and chop meat from ham bone; discard ham bone. Stir meat and spinach into soup. Cover and cook until spinach is wilted, about 2 minutes. Serves 6 - 8.

WARM LENTIL SALAD

2 1/2 cups unpeeled baby yellow potatoes, halved
2 1/2 cups sliced asparagus (1 inch)
4 cups water
1 cup dried green lentils, rinsed and drained
1 clove garlic, bruised
1 bay leaf
1 tsp salt
2 tbsp sherry vinegar
2 tbsp finely chopped chives
1 tsp finely chopped shallot
1 tsp Dijon mustard
1/3 cup canola oil, divided
1 pkg (5 oz/142 g) baby kale, chopped
1/4 cup crumbled soft goat cheese

1. Cook potatoes in boiling salted water until tender, adding asparagus for last 2 minutes of cooking; drain and set aside.
2. Combine 4 cups water, lentils, garlic, bay leaf and salt in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil.
3. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, until lentils are tender, about 20 - 25 minutes. Drain; remove and discard garlic and bay leaf.
4. Spread lentils out in a rimmed baking sheet to cool slightly; set aside.
5. To prepare dressing, whisk together vinegar, chives, shallot and mustard until combined. Gradually whisk in 1/4 cup oil until blended; set aside.
6. Heat remaining 1 tbsp oil in a large non-stick frypan over medium heat. Add potatoes and asparagus; sauté until warmed, about 2 minutes.
7. Add kale and cook, stirring, until kale wilts slightly, about 30 seconds. Remove from heat.
8. Combine lentils and potato mixture in a bowl.
9. Add dressing and toss to combine. Sprinkle with cheese. Serve immediately. Serves 8.

Cook's Note: Baby kale is more tender and mild in flavour than mature kale. It is often used as a salad green. Look for it in the produce section of grocery stores where packaged greens are sold.